

I listened. It had to do with you, Mr. Head, with Mr. Dufur, and in spite of my lover himself, John North, just as he murmured the last words of his awful secret he fell back into complete unconsciousness.

It immediately hurried from the room. I knew enough of the effects of opium to be certain that John would have no remembrance of what he had said to me when he awoke in the morning. I saw the landlady, told her enough of my strange position to insure her secrecy, and hurried away.

"That night," I said, "that dreadful night, I have not had an hour's quiet. The man I love is to be the instrument used by Mrs. Koluchy for her terrible purpose. A blow to the head, and John North is to strike it. What the blow is in itself, how the fatal deed is to be committed, I have not the slightest idea; but your friend is doomed. Can you not understand my awful position? John North is to execute madame's vengeance. It matters little to her if he eventually hangs for his crime; for, with her usual cunning, she has so arranged matters that she herself will not be implicated. I have, I should also wish to save, but John North comes first; don't you understand?"

"I understand," I replied, "and I pity you from my heart."

"Then, if you pity, you will help me."

"Undoubtedly I will."

"That is good; that is what I hoped." "But what is to be done?" At present it seems to me that you and I are in the terrible position of knowing that there are rocks ahead without having the slightest idea what they are."

"I know this much at least," she replied. "The fatal deed will be committed in London, hence my entreaty to your friend not to leave Eastbourne. I might have guessed that from that sort. Then I tried what a letter would do, begging him to meet me at the Marble Arch. Little I cared what he thought of me if only I could save John North. Mr. Dufur did not come, and as a last resource I fled to you."

"I am glad you did so," I answered. "Have you any plan in your head on which I can immediately act?"

"I have, but first of all I want your promise. You must not only save your friend, but you must save Mr. North. I want your word of honor that you will never give your testimony against him."

"I can only say that I will not be the one to hand him over to the police," I replied. "more it is impossible to promise. Will that content you?"

"She hesitated and looked thoughtful. "I suppose it must," she said at last. "Will Mr. Dufur make a similar promise?"

"I think I can answer for him," I said.

"Very well. Now, then, Mr. Head, it is just possible that we may be victorious yet. I have discovered that from time to time Mr. North receives communications from Mrs. Koluchy. If we could get hold of some of these we might reach the heart of this ghastly plot."

"But how is that to be done?" I asked.

"I have acquainted myself with all Mr. North's movements," continues the girl. "He goes to his lodgings every evening between 10 and 11 o'clock, not leaving them again until the morning. Doubtless night after night he has recourse to the solace of the opium pipe. It is impossible for me to visit him again, for I am too closely watched, but will you go to him—will you go to him?"

"Do you really mean this?" I asked.

"I do," she replied, "it is the only thing to be done. You can take a message from Mr. Dufur. You are Mr. Dufur's friend; so a message from him will be natural. When you have got into Mr. North's presence you will know what to do. Your own judgment will guide you. In all probability he will under the effect of opium, and you can get further secrets from him. At the worst, you may be able to find some of madame's communications."

"I stood still, considering. "I will go," I said; "but success seems more than doubtful."

"I do not agree with you," I am certain that, with your tact, you will succeed. If you can only get hold of some of madame's letters all may yet be well. By the way, can you read cipher?"

"I understand many ciphers," I replied.

"I have discovered that Madame Koluchy always writes in cipher. Go to-night. Do not fail. This is Mr. North's address. Do not try to communicate with me again. I shall know if you succeed, and if—but I dare not think of other alternatives." She held out her hand; her face was white, her lips trembled.

"You are a brave man," she said. "I feel somehow that you will succeed. For you must be out of this house before our little servant returns."

That evening, between 10 and 11 o'clock I found myself at North's lodgings. The landlady opened the door. I inquired if North was in, said that I had come with an urgent message from Dufur, and asked to see him at once.

"I do not know whether he is in," replied the woman, "but if you will go upstairs to the sitting room on the third floor just facing the landing, you can see for yourself."

I nodded to her and ran upstairs. A moment later I was knocking at the door which the landlady had indicated. There was no reply—I turned the handle and went in. One glance around the room caused my heart to beat with apprehension. The bird had evidently flown. Signs of a speedy departure were all too evident.

"Some papers partly torn and partly burnt were lying in the waste, and some more papers completely charred to ashes were near it; the door which opened into the bedroom was flung back and wardrobe open and empty. My next business was to go to the grate, secure the half-burnt paper, thrust it into my pocket, and go down stairs again. The landlady was nowhere in sight, so I let myself out.

About midnight I returned home. "Now, for one last forlorn hope," I said to myself. "The man has evidently got a fright and has gone off. But like many another clever scoundrel, he did not quite forget a scoundrel, for his departure. This paper is only half-burnt. Can it be possible that it contains the hidden cipher which may yet save a friend?"

certain words. Could the torn paper in my hands have been used for a similar purpose? I held it up to the light, but no sign of any pricking appeared.

Pacing to and fro in my laboratory I formulated every conceivable hypothesis that might throw light on the terrible problem. What was to be done?

At last, weary with anxiety, I went to bed, and, exhausted as I was, sank into a heavy sleep.

I was aroused by my servant calling me at the usual hour the next morning, and almost at once my thoughts flew to our terrible position. I dressed and went again to my laboratory to examine once more the fragment of paper.

Without having any definite reason for doing so, I got out my camera, and, placing the paper in a strong light, exposed it to one of my rapid plates; then, going to my dark room, I proceeded to develop it. As I bent over the dish and looked at the solution to and fro in the plate I suddenly started and my heart beat quickly. Was it only imagination, or was something coming out—something beyond and above the mere printed words of the newspaper.

In the dim red light I could almost swear that I detected separate dots on the plate, which the paper itself did not show. Could there be a flaw in the negative?

Rapidly fixing it, I took it out and brought it to the light. A cry of joy burst from my lips. Over some of the printed letters something had been put which showed up in the negative, as white as the paper, something which would reflect the ultra-violet rays of the spectrum—something fluorescent. Perhaps a solution of quinine was the agent employed. This would, I knew, be quite invisible to the naked eye. Scarcely able to contain the excitement which consumed me, I dried the plate rapidly, and printed off a copy, and without waiting to tone it, took it to the light and examined it with my lens.

Great heavens! the awful plot was about to be unveiled. A cipher had really been sent to North in this subtle way. The letters which had been touched with the quinine stood out clearly. As the newspaper was torn and a great part of it burnt, I could not read the full details of the ghastly plot in consecutive order, but the following fragments left little doubt of what the result was meant to be:

"Aneroid substituted. Thermometer explodes at 20 degrees Reaumur. * * * Leave London tonight."

My brain swam. Quick as lightning my thoughts flew to Dufur.

"Thermometer explodes at 20 degrees," I found myself repeating.

Twenty degrees on the Reaumur scale in Russia means 77 degrees Fahrenheit on our English scale. For the last few days the thermometer in London had daily recorded as high a temperature as this. Had it done so yet today? Dufur had an aneroid barometer hanging in his private room at this office. In it I knew there was a thermometer. This was enough.

I bolted from the house, and in another moment a hansom was taking me at a hard gallop to Chancery Lane. In half an hour I was at my friend's door. I jumped out of the hansom and dashed through the clerk's office into the private room. Dufur was evidently just come in, and was seated at his desk.

"Is that you, North? How late you are. I want you to go at once," he began. Then he caught sight of my face, and sprang from his chair.

"Norman!" he exclaimed, "what in the world is the matter?"

"Get out of this," I shouted. "You will never see that ruffian North again; but no matter, you must save yourself now."

As I spoke a pushed Dufur roughly to the farther end of the room. My eyes were fixed upon the thermometer in the aneroid which hung on the wall over his desk. The mercury stood at 76 degrees. Seeing a jug of cold water which stood on a table near, I dashed the contents over the instrument. The mercury sank. I was right. I could see it. I was just in time.

"What in heaven's name is the matter? Are you mad?" said Dufur, gazing at me in astonishment.

"Matter!" I echoed. "the devil's the matter. That thing is an infernal machine."

"That aneroid an infernal machine? My dear Head, you must have lost your senses. I have had it for years."

"This is not the aneroid you have had for years," I answered. "This is a bucket of cold water—don't stand staring like that. Cannot you understand that we may be blown to pieces any moment?"

He paused just to take in the meaning of my words; then he caught left his face, and he rushed from the room.

"There," I said as I unhooked the instrument and lowered it gently into the bucket which he had got from the housekeeper's kitchen. "We are safe for the present. But look here."

We went down and examined the aneroid closely. Fused into the glass bore at the line which marked 77 degrees was the tiniest metallic projection.

"But what does it mean?" I explained myself, for heaven's sake," he said excitedly.

"I will in a moment," I answered, drawing out my heavy knife. With the screwdriver I unscrewed the back and levered it open.

"Good heavens! look here," I said. The space in the hollow woodwork was literally packed with masses of gun cotton, and below it lay a small accumulator with its fine connecting wires. I cut the wires and emptied the cotton into the water.

"Don't you see now?" I cried. "This is the most devilishly clever infernal machine that could be contrived. When the mercury rose to 77 degrees the circuit would be completed, the gun cotton fired and your office blown to kingdom come."

"But who has done it?" said Dufur. "Who in the name of heaven could have contrived the aneroid?"

"For heaven's sake, North, I have to tell you, but I must do so in confidence."

"Let us go at once to Scotland Yard. Head. This is unbearable."

"We cannot do so at present," I replied. "I am under promise to hold back information."

Dufur stared at me as though once more he thought me possessed.

"I will explain matters tonight," I said. "Come now, let us turn the key in the door and go out."

Dufur suddenly glanced at his watch.

"In the excitement of this infernal affair I had almost forgotten my unfortunate client," he cried, "this case must be coming on at the Old Bailey now. I must start at once."

"I will walk with you," I said.

A moment later we found ourselves in Fleet street. We passed an optician's—in the window was a thermometer. We stood and looked at it with interest. The mercury was standing at 80 degrees.

That evening the strange story which Elsie Fancourt had confided to me was told to Dufur.

"Once again madame has scored," was his remark when I had finished. "and that scoundrel North gets off scot free."

"Madame has not quite scored, for

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your life has been spared," I said, with a feeling.

"The whole thing was planned with the most infernal cunning," said Dufur. "Yesterday North came into my office, pointed out that the aneroid was not working properly, and asked me if he might take it to an optician's in Fleet street. I naturally gave him permission. He brought it back in the evening, and put it into its place. Yes, the whole plot was timed with the most consummate skill. The thermometer has been daily rising for the last few days, and madame guessed only too well that it would reach 77 degrees before I went to court this morning. Doubtless North had informed her that the Disney trial was to come on second in the list, and that I should not be required at the Old Bailey before half-past 11. Well, I have escaped, and I owe it to you, Head, and to Miss Fancourt. I pity that poor girl; she is

too good to be thrown away on a scoundrel like North."

"I wonder what her future history will be," I said. "There is no doubt that North is fast in madame's toils. Miss Fancourt believes, however, that her mission in life is to reclaim him. The ways of some good women are inexplicable."

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